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AUTHOR	Chavkin, Nancy Feyl; Gonzalez, Dora Lara
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ABSTRACT

This digest examines barriers to parent participation in the education of Mexican American students, and successful programs and strategies for overcoming those barriers. Research has found family participation in education to be twice as predictive of academic achievement as family socioeconomic status. Mexican American parents care about their children's education but may not be involved in it because they believe the roles of home and school are sharply delineated and they respect the teacher's role. Other barriers to parent participation include a negative view of the school system, past negative experiences with education, and language barriers. Schools can open the doors to more parental involvement through culturally sensitive outreach efforts such as bilingual communication between school and home, home visits, informal parent-organized meetings at a neutral community site, and, in general, a personal approach. Examples of successful family programs and activities include an intergenerational literacy program, informal education on family functioning and child development, after-school and summer classes, parenting training, advocacy training, mother-daughter career programs, and empowerment programs. Partnerships between families and schools involve continuous two-way communication and shared responsibility for educational outcomes. The attitudes and practices of teachers and principals made a difference in the amount of parental involvement and in the achievement of students. Training can help faculty and family members take on the new roles needed for effective partnerships. (SV)

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FORGING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN MEXICAN AMERICAN PARENTS AND THE SCHOOLS

ERIC Digest

By
Nancy Feyl Chavkin
and
Dora Lara Gonzalez

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Forging Partnerships Between Mexican American Parents and the Schools

by Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Dora Lara Gonzalez

ERIC DIGEST

According to the Bureau of the Census (1994), there are approximately 13 million Mexican Americans in the United States. In her review of the status of education for Mexican American students, Sosa (1993) reports alarming statistics—a decline in high school completion rates, a steady rise in the dropout rate, and high numbers of students two or more years behind grade level. In light of these facts, educators have an educational imperative to look for new ways to work with Mexican American families. This digest describes research supporting family participation in students' education. It then describes barriers to participation faced by many Mexican American parents and successful programs and strategies for overcoming those barriers. Finally, the benefits of two-way communication and school-family partnerships are described.

Research on Parental Involvement and Student Achievement

Research has shown that one of the most promising ways to increase students' achievement is to involve their families (Chavkin, 1993; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Herbert Walberg (1984) found that family participation in education was twice as predictive of academic learning as family socioeconomic status. Establishing partnerships with families has many benefits for schools and families, but Epstein says, "the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life" (1995, p. 701).

Barriers to Parental Involvement

For many Mexican American parents, lack of involvement in their children's education is erroneously seen as lack of interest, but Montecel et al. (1993) present evidence that Mexican American parents do care about their children's education. The reasons for limited involvement include beliefs that the roles of home and school are sharply delineated. Mexican American parents see their role as being responsible for providing basic needs as well as instilling respect and proper behavior. They see the school's role as instilling knowledge (Nicolau & Ramos, 1993). They believe that one should not interfere with the job of the other. Nicolau and Ramos compare Mexican Americans' respect for teachers with the awe that most Americans have (or used to have) for doctors or priests.

Other barriers to parental involvement include a negative view of the school system, past negative experiences with education, and language barriers. Often parents view the school as a bureaucracy controlled by non-Hispanics. The school often reminds Mexican American parents of their own educational experiences including discrimination and humiliation for speaking Spanish. Many times the lack of bilingual staff can make parents feel powerless when they are attempting to resolve problems or advocate for their children.

Opening the Doors to More Parental Involvement

How then can schools open the doors to more parental involvement and build partnerships with Mexican American families? Begin by making parental involvement easy and interesting, at a pace that is comfortable for parents. Outreach efforts can and will work, but they must be done in a culturally sensitive manner and begin with a strengths perspective. Mexican American families have many strengths and these strengths need to be recognized from the beginning.

Nicolau and Ramos' (1993) examination of 42 projects provides helpful insights that can inform practice. Communication should be a major focus of the involvement effort. Reception areas in schools should include bilingual staff; telephone calls and written communication should be available in Spanish. For some parents, home visits or visits at a neutral site, such as a community center, offer a less threatening environment. In general, the more personal the approach, the better it works for Mexican American parents. Written correspondence is not as effective as the personal conference; in fact, it is wrong to assume that all families are literate.

If meetings seem appropriate, invitations should be extended by parents to parents, preferably neighbor to neighbor. A good idea for a first meeting is to ask parents who are more familiar with school personnel to bring three friends to a meeting at a community center outside the school. Meetings should be informal and based on the interests of the parents, with transportation and child care provided.

Selecting Programs and Activities

There are many programs and activities for parents and schools to consider. Some focus on family involvement in home learning activities and others focus on parents' continued education. Each school must select and adapt activities that best match the interests and needs of their families. The programs described below are only a sample of the successful approaches being used across the country (Goodson, Swartz, & Millsap, 1991).

- Project FIEL (El Paso, Texas) was begun in 1985 and is in eight elementary schools in El Paso. This intergenerational literacy program involves limited-English-proficient parents and their kindergarten children in oral language, story writing, reading, discussions, and at-home activities.
- Prestame una Comadre (Springfield, Illinois) means "loan me a godmother" in Spanish and works with migrant Head Start families. Social workers conduct home visits as often as three times weekly and hold small group meetings. Families work on increasing self-reliance, learning about child development and education, and improving family functioning.

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- Academia del Pueblo—developed by the National Council of La Raza—provides afterschool and summer classes for Hispanic children, monthly parent groups, and literacy classes three times a week. The program operates at the Guadalupe Center, a multiservice organization in Kansas City, Missouri.

- McAllen Parental Involvement Program (McAllen, Texas) includes three core activities: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (PECES is the Spanish version of this commercially available curriculum), evening study centers, and parent meetings on a variety of topics.

Some effective programs are part of a national or state network or are supported by private funds. ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence (APEX) trains Latino parents to become effective advocates for their children at home and at school. The Hispanic Policy Development Project has worked with hundreds of parents using an enrichment model rather than a deficit approach. Project AVANCE, a privately funded program in San Antonio, Texas, uses door-to-door recruitment strategies as part of its outreach to develop parenting skills among low-income Mexican American mothers. Mother-daughter programs, developed at Texas universities, work to expand the role of Hispanic women by exposing them to nontraditional roles, campus field trips, and career activities. Empowerment programs such as Comité de Padres Latinos in Carpintería, California (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991), emphasize treating parents as valued participants and often lead to active participation by parents.

Using the Partnership Approach

Sustaining family involvement requires a commitment to open, continuous, two-way communication with Mexican American families. Most schools have established methods of one-way communication with parents, but the need for more two-way communication cannot be stressed enough. It is critically important for educators to take the time to listen to parents. The attitudes and practices of teachers and principals make a difference in the amount of parental involvement and in the achievement of students (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Sometimes educators overlook what they can learn from Mexican American families. These families are rich sources of information that can be used in the classroom. Parents have interacted with their children, and they know many of their learning styles as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Parents also know the community.

Partnerships with families require all participants to share responsibility for educational outcomes. This perspective represents a major shift for schools from merely delivering services to students to taking active, integrated roles that validate the cultural and social experiences of families. To succeed in this partnership role, staff need to ask parents for their ideas, meet with parent and community representatives to define goals, and develop a plan for parent and community involvement.

Training can help faculty and family members take on new roles needed for effective partnerships. Ongoing partnerships need evaluation and frequent checkpoints to see if their goals and objectives are being met and if those goals and objectives are still appropriate. Keeping programs flexible helps everyone adjust to changes within the student body, families, the school staff, and the community.

Conclusion

There is a big difference between the rhetoric of partnerships and the activity of partnerships. Educators must truly believe and act on the belief that parents are their children's *first* teacher and the *only* teacher that remains with a child for a long period of time. Educators must discard the old deficit model of working with families and, instead, operate on an enrichment model founded on the belief that parents truly want the best for their children. Not only must educators tell parents that they are equally as important as the school, they must tell students how important their homes and communities are. Having a partnership allows educators to tap a rich source of cultural knowledge and personal experiences. Mexican American families want their children to succeed in school, and educators have an important responsibility to work with these students and their families.

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Nancy Feyl Chavkin is a professor of social work at the Walter Richter Institute of Social Work, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas. Dora Lara Gonzalez is a graduate student at the School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin.

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